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ABSTRACT

In 1991, the Southeastern Regional Vision for Education (SERVE), a federally funded education laboratory, began a study to identify the barriers to school reform in six southeastern states--Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina. This document presents findings of that study and the second area of study it generated--an examination of state accountability systems. Data were obtained through a review of state regulations; interviews with statewide educational and political leaders; and 10 focus groups comprised of teachers and administrators in 3 school districts. The study examined four kinds of barriers to reform--statutory and regulatory, fiscal and leadership, organizational structural and political, and cultural and additudinal barriers. Six prevailing obstacles to educational reform in the Southeast were identified: instability of political leadership; poor economic conditions; stop-and-start reforms; inability to reach consensus on goals; underinvestment in training; and lack of trust. An additional serious obstacle was the tendency toward rapid implementation of "high stakes" state accountability systems before goals and standards have been established. The background of the last decade of educational reform and the status of reform in the southeastern states is described. A detailed discussion of the six obstacles to successful change and their implications for policy are presented in the last section. Despite local conventional wisdom, overregulation and inflexibility were not found to be the major barriers to reform. (LMI)

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Overcoming Barriers to School Reform in the Southeast

Revised
September 8, 1994

Special Report of
The SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education

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Introduction: Getting School Reform Right

Why isn't school reform moving faster? What barriers stand in the way? How can such barriers be eliminated or reduced? These are the questions that SERVE, the federally funded education laboratory for Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina and South Carolina intended to answer in a SERVE project commissioned in 1991.

The project began in the six state capitals with the assumption that the major barriers to educational reform were inadequate resources, centralized decision-making and lack of innovation. After spending a year reviewing state rules and regulations regarding funding, flexibility and accountability, it became clear that more information was needed from schools themselves.

The process of inquiry led to some of the poorest, most rural school systems in the Southeast and, although this path was not predetermined, perhaps it was inevitable. Included in the study were areas such as the Mississippi Delta, southern Georgia and the coastal plains of the Carolinas, where some of the schools most likely not to measure up to today's demands are found. In-depth interviews and focus groups with teachers, school administrators, business people and local school board members in these "at-risk" school districts gave a new appreciation of the challenges facing such schools. With this understanding came an increasing sense of urgency about the findings of this report.

Two years of study determined that there are six prevailing obstacles to educational reform in the Southeast:

- Instability of political leadership;
- Poor economic conditions;
- Stop and start reforms;
- Inability to reach consensus on goals;
- Under-investment in training; and
- Lack of trust.

While all of these obstacles represent serious barriers to educational reform, an additional impending obstacle was also identified which caused concern: the tendency toward rapid implementation of "high stakes" state accountability systems before goals and standards have been put in place. This issue loomed so large on the education horizon that SERVE commissioned a separate study to review the issue and recommend a new framework for state accountability systems.

Our goal in this report is to help policymakers, educators and others concerned about the slow pace of school reform redouble their efforts to improve schools in the SERVE region. Understanding that neither the problems nor the solutions are unique to the Southeast, it is hoped that this work will help both the states in and outside of the Southeast region as they seek the "world-class" schools that our future demands and that our children deserve.

Background: The Disappointing Results of a Decade of Reform

Just over a decade ago, a group of 18 concerned citizens shocked the nation by reporting that as far as the quality of American public schools was concerned, the emperor had no clothes. Their warning that mediocre schools "threaten our very future as a nation" sounded an alarm that is still reverberating today.

The 1983 publication of the National Education Commission's *A Nation at Risk* jolted U.S. public schools into a new era of reform, the first since the launching of Sputnik in 1957 and the largest ever. Virtually every state legislature and statewide board of education enacted school improvement programs during the 1980s based on the recommendations in the report. Billions of new state tax dollars flowed into the schools, thousands of laws and regulations were imposed, and dozens of promising programs were implemented under the banner of school reform.

The only problem was that the reforms didn't work, or at best, didn't work as well as policymakers had hoped. Despite all the good intentions and activities of reformers, American students performed little better at the end of the decade than they had at the beginning.

Why? Looking back, it is clear that, while the country had been determined since 1983 to create "better" schools, it wasn't until the end of the 1980s that people began debating what better schools would look like or should look like. The early reform initiatives basically involved doing more of the same: more pay for teachers, more time in school, more course requirements. In hindsight, few were challenging whether the right things were being done in the first place. Only a few were raising or answering the most basic questions:

- What do we want students to know when they graduate?
- What should they be able to do?
- How can we determine if they have achieved these objectives?

By the end of the 1980s, when farsighted political and educational leaders began to realize that the problems were far more complicated than originally assumed, the reform movement took a dramatic shift. Borrowing from the experience of American corporations, these reformers started looking for ways to rethink and reorganize basic structures. In particular, they emphasized the need to give principals and teachers autonomy and flexibility in exchange for higher standards of accountability.

Ironically, ten years after the reform movement began, the accountability push led more reformers to ask in retrospect what should have been the first question: What do we want our schools to accomplish? The good news is that the question is finally being raised by a critical mass. In 1990, the National Governors Association and President Bush came out with national goals for education, an unprecedented action in this country. The Clinton administration and leading governors have followed up on this initiative with the continuation of the National Goals Commission, now working to develop voluntary national education goals, standards and assessment measures.

The United States is the only major industrial nation that does not have non-voluntary national goals and standards for education. This lack, and the tradition of states' rights, makes the question of deciding what we want to do much more complicated here than in other countries. Each state has to determine what it wants young people to know and to be able to do and each has to administer testing programs to determine whether it is getting the desired outcomes. Fortunately, many southeastern states are well along the way in developing curriculum frameworks to address these questions.

As Lewis Carroll wrote in Alice in Wonderland, "If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there." After following many roads, the school reform movement finally appears to have found its focus and is beginning to determine where states need to be heading.

School Reform in the Southeast

The Southeast is confronting the issues of school reform and it would not be unfair to say that these states are playing catch-up ball with other regions. This means that there is more to gain from experimentation and less to lose by taking risks.

The fact is that the Southeast is near the bottom of the nation's educational ladder in a nation that is near the bottom of the developed world's educational ladder. On the input side of the ledger, the region has historically underspent and underpaid on behalf of schooling and has not been a leader in innovation. On the output side, these states have typically had among the highest dropout rates and lowest standardized test scores in the nation.

Societal issues help explain the gap. Repeated studies show a direct correlation between the income and educational levels of parents and the performance of their children in the schools. In the Southeast, where reliance on low wages and unskilled labor has been the norm, educators are confronted with millions of young people whose parents were not served well by the schools. Ultimately, this cycle of under-education and under-employment will have to be broken before the region's schools become competitive.

Responding to these needs, southeastern states are emerging at the forefront of school reform. While the pace of reform is slower than most would want, there is significant evidence of southern leadership in school reform:

- The current and former U.S. Secretary of Education are former southern Governors Richard Riley of South Carolina and Lamar Alexander of Tennessee.
- These governors, as well as Governor Jim Hunt of North Carolina, former Governor William Winters of Mississippi and former Governor Bob Graham of Florida all earned reputations in the National Governors Association and other organizations for commitment to school reform.
- Most recently, Governors Carroll Campbell of South Carolina, Zell Miller of Georgia, and Jim Folsom, Jr. of Alabama have picked up the baton and kept the reform leadership tradition in the South.
- The state's chief school officers have been working closely with these governors for reform.

Many of the highly touted early reform efforts such as career ladders, comprehensive basic education programs, increased graduation requirements and changes in certification laws also started in the Southeast. More recently the Southeast has led the way in accountability plans, intervention strategies and waivers of state laws and regulations.

Several other conditions have played a role in boosting the reform movement in the Southeast as well. The lack of unionization makes it easier for reformers to push statewide change since there is no need to bargain at the local level. Much of the reform legislation that southern states take for granted would be difficult or impossible in the Northeast (e.g., due to local negotiation restraints). Secondly, because there are so many poor communities, southeastern states tend to put far more state money into education than do other states. Since roughly two-thirds of each education dollar comes from the state in the Southeast, compared to predominantly local funding in the Northeast, the state has more ability to drive school reform.

But for all the region's concentrated efforts, the results have been slow in materializing. While none of the six states in the southeastern region can be faulted for investing millions of new dollars and countless hours in school reform initiatives, it must be admitted that none of the reform dreams of any of the states have yet to be realized as completely as their architects would have hoped.

The region can point to some improvements in progress based on traditional measures, such as the numbers of students who graduate from high school, SAT scores, the graduates who go on for advanced education, and the percentage of the population that can read and write. But the southeastern states are learning the same lesson American business recently learned: in the 1990s, the old standards no longer count. To be "world class," the schools must meet entirely new standards.

Approach: Assessing the Barriers to School Reform

Determined to learn from the past, the study set out to identify the major barriers to previous school reform efforts in the Southeast. The initial assumption as the study began in 1991 was that restrictive rules and regulations and lack of funds would head the list of obstacles. Instead what was found were six characteristic factors that make school reform an elusive goal rather than a reality:

1. Instability in political and educational leadership;
2. Poor economic conditions;
3. Stop and start reforms;
4. Inability to reach consensus on goals;
5. Under-investment in training and professional development; and
6. Lack of trust.

How were these conclusions reached? SERVE began its scan of the school reform environment in the Southeast by analyzing statutes, policies and regulations on the books in each of the six member states. This project, directed by the Public School Forum of North Carolina and conducted by researchers from the University of South Carolina and Appalachian State University, focused on the following basic questions:

- How much do states encumber school systems with needless bureaucracy and regulation?
- How much room is there for schools to innovate?
- How rigid are the funding systems?
- What effect do accountability systems have at the local level?

In seeking the answers to these questions, guidance was obtained from an advisory committee comprised of two people from each of the six SERVE states. The advisory committee, comprised of representatives from state agency staffs, local superintendents and administrative staff, business leaders involved in reform efforts, foundation staff and other community leaders, provided helpful perspectives and insights that significantly shaped this document.

For the purposes of this report, a barrier was defined as any state law regulation, policy, belief or fiscal constraint that prevents a school district from making appropriate decisions about how best to educate students. The key word here is "appropriate," which reflects the belief that some decisions, such as appropriations, certification, performance goals and assessments, may be appropriately made by the state while others may keep school officials from using their best judgment to educate children.

The research team looked specifically at four kinds of barriers, raising the following questions:

1. **Statutory and regulatory barriers**
   To what extent do existing state laws, policies and regulations permit local innovation and

improvement? Do state laws and regulations prescribe the nature of schooling or encourage efforts to change? How do federal laws and regulations affect state reform efforts?

2. **Fiscal and leadership barriers**
   Do fiscal approaches and allocation procedures facilitate or prevent school reform? Are special considerations made for under-served populations or geographically isolated districts? Are state policymakers assured that local leaders are adequately prepared to implement decentralized reform initiatives? Are local educators prepared to accept the consequences of inadequate performance?

3. **Organizational structural and political barriers**
   Are there statewide procedures for requiring school improvement? What is the history of long-term support for state-sponsored reforms? Are there accountability models in place to establish the relationship between local autonomy and improved student performance? Are there patterns of political activity or voting blocks that influence school reform?

4. **Cultural and attitudinal barriers**
   To what extent do prevailing attitudes about schooling dictate the success of reform initiatives? Is there a systematic process for determining the relationship of present educational practices and the needs of the next century? Is there a widespread understanding among educators of the relationship between the quality of education and the quality of life?

The results of this high-level review, summarized in the next chapter, sparked our interest; specifically, in the state and local perspective on educational reform. Therefore, SERVE expanded the project to include in-depth interviews with state leaders, focus groups with local educators and meetings with representatives from other states involved in school reform.

First, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted with statewide educational business and political leaders whose positions influence the effectiveness of the state's schools. In each of the six SERVE states information was gathered from legislative leaders, legislative staff, state superintendents or their deputies, governors' education advisors, representatives of teachers organizations and school boards, members of business organizations and others involved in school reform. These interviews were a rich source of information, stimulating many of the policy conclusions contained in this report.

Next, a series of focus groups were held on the local level both to probe the impact of reforms and to gain an internal view of the problems schools face. Three North Carolina school districts were selected as the sites for the local barriers study based on several common characteristics: all have dynamic, innovative leaders as superintendents: a reputation for innovation and risk taking; and are largely rural, with lower than average tax wealth.

A total of ten focus groups were held in the three districts to assess the opinions of principals, teachers, central office staff and superintendents. The discussions centered around three questions: How do you assess the climate for school improvement and reform in your district? How likely is it that creative risk-taking can occur? What barriers do you see to meaningful change? The frank answers

of local educators increased understanding of the enormity of the challenges schools confront, particularly in traditionally low-performing districts.

Finally, information was collected from outside the region to learn from the experience of other states that are implementing accountability legislation designed to give the state control of schools or school systems. A seminar and discussion session with representatives from Texas, Kentucky and New Jersey provided additional insights into the particular problems associated with the "high stakes" accountability systems now being implemented or considered in the Southeast.

The troubling conclusions culled from this collection of information are outlined in the remainder of our report. The findings are presented here in an attempt to help policymakers and others concerned about the snail's pace of educational reform redouble their efforts to improve schools across the Southeast.

Findings: Overcoming the Barriers to School Reform

It was discovered that virtually every state in the region has already started moving away from the centralized, regulatory bureaucracies of the past. Recognizing the need for greater local autonomy and innovation, states are eliminating policies that no longer make sense and are allowing waivers of policies that may not apply to specific districts. **Despite local conventional wisdom, overregulation and inflexibility are not the major barriers to reform.**

However, these efforts to provide an overview of barriers to reform did identify other disturbing trends: **the growing instability of political leadership; the repercussion of a slowdown in the economy; a history of stop-and-start reform initiatives; the inability to achieve consensus about goals; an under-investment in training and staff development; and a pervasive lack of trust within the educational system.** We concluded that these six factors are, in fact, the major obstacles to school reform in the Southeast.

The findings summarized in the remainder of this report indicate serious obstacles that must be overcome if school reform is to survive and thrive. These conditions can be corrected, given the political will and the public demand. Toward that end, "policy implications" are offered for each barrier identified, suggesting changes based on the best practices identified in states within the region and beyond.

It is important to keep in mind that, although these six barriers occur in all of the SERVE member states, some are more serious in one state than in another. Some states have already made progress in the recommended directions; others have a long way to go. All can do better and must if youth are to be prepared for the next century.

Instability of Leadership: The "Vision Thing"

As proponents of grassroots school reform advocate, the basis for real change in education is a consensus around where you are going and how you are going to get there. The experience of the Southeast indicates that consensus is an easy thing to achieve in two or four-year spurts. However, when leaders change, the consensus frequently changes and last year's panacea becomes this year's pariah.

In examining educational policymaking over the decade of school reform, the instability of political leadership became readily apparent. An analysis of the top six educational positions in the six member states showed that only two of 36 positions had remained constant since the movement began in 1983 and that the average position had changed leadership three times since then.

In an environment as dependent on public policy and public funding as education is, changes in political office often mean changes in priorities. Looking at the turnover in political leadership in the

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Southeast it is not surprising that the history of school reform is one of stops and starts and dramatic changes in direction.

And that's not all. Changes at the state level are exacerbated by the rapid acceleration of turnover of local superintendents. Not too many years ago the local superintendent's position remained fairly stable. Now, however, in most communities in the Southeast and across the nation superintendents tend to change every two and a half to three and a half years.

In most situations, within one year of a new superintendent's coming on board, there is a characteristic change in the front office and a dramatic shuffling of school principals. This era of "revolving door" superintendents means that most school systems are in a never-ending cycle of changing leaders, changing directions, and changing priorities.

Changes in local leadership when added to changes in top state leadership create a public policy whirlpool at a particularly unfortunate time. Turnover can be absorbed into the system in periods when schools operate in a "business as usual" fashion. But, at a time when the thinking about what schools could or should be doing is changing dramatically, it operates as a major barrier to school reform.

Policy Implications

For states initiating major, multi-year educational reforms that could falter as a result of changing priorities or leadership, South Carolina's model warrants close study. When the state enacted its major school reform legislation it established an independent "watch dog" committee charged with issuing an annual report on how the state was doing with the one cent tax that funded the reform initiative. Many observers credit this group with maintaining the consistency of purpose that South Carolina has shown over the years.

Given the growing complexity of school-related policy debates and the almost certain turnover in political leadership, state legislative bodies might want to consider a training and retraining function for legislators in order to instill a sense of "institutional memory" about school reform. Such a strategy could help empower new leaders by providing them with the necessary information about school reform.

At the local level further study on superintendent turnover appears to be warranted. Among the questions to be considered are: Is the problem related to school board-superintendent relations? If so, could additional training of all parties curb the rapid increase in turnover? If not, what other factors are involved? Should school systems look toward financial incentives that would reward longevity and reduce turnover? Should school systems make more of an effort to develop a succession plan?

Economic Conditions: Cutting Back on Programs and Trust

Predictably, the economy was one of the first factors identified as a barrier to school reform. But contrary to conventional wisdom, economic problems were not viewed as the major obstacles preventing local school districts from sustaining reform efforts. However, some of the more predictable

problems cannot be discounted. By any description, the Southeast is in danger of sliding into a dual socio-economic pattern, divided by areas of high growth and great promise, and those of low growth and little hope. This dichotomy is seen not only in terms of jobs and income, it is reflected in educational opportunity as well.

As the Southeast wrestles with school reform it is also wrestling with the economic dividing lines that still separate its educational opportunity boundaries. There are differences in capacity to reform between the Charlottes, Atlantas, Orlandos, Columbias, Jacksons and Birminghams and rural, isolated school districts.

Other economic factors impacting school reform are more subtle. In the early 1990s, slower growth in revenues and increased demands for services have elected officials in an unenviable position. With the public's reluctance to approve tax increases and constituents fighting to protect their interests, policymakers often opted to cut back on programs, delay funding or mandate programs without providing finding.

Since state funding accounts for the majority of school spending, a change of heart at the state level is felt in every southeastern school district. The adage about employee layoffs, "last hired, first fired," applies to school reform initiatives as well. Throughout the region, many of the most promising reform initiatives have been curtailed, delayed, cut back or cut out as a result of budget tightening. For example:

- In Mississippi this tendency translated into a reform package that was never funded.
- In North Carolina it meant an ambitious basic education program that was slowed down.
- In Florida it resulted in school systems making significant cutbacks in ongoing programs.

The school districts that need the most help, poor, rural districts, are the ones hardest hit by the loss of state funds since they don't have the tax base to make up the difference. Because these areas are geographically isolated and are likely to pay lower salaries, they also face the problem of recruiting qualified teachers and principals. This combination of factors limits the potential to expand educational opportunities, creating a vicious cycle of failure.

Beyond the actual loss of programs, budget cutbacks and stops and starts in reform initiatives cost the states in human terms, as educators come to believe that "they" don't mean it and can't be trusted.

Policy Implications

Accurately estimating the obvious and more hidden costs of major reform initiatives and being able to see the revenue stream that will make the initiative possible is critically important if states are to successfully implement these reforms. The tendency to underestimate all of the real, as well as unintended, cost consequences of reform legislation is a common contributor to slowing down or abandoning reform measures. One state, for instance, estimated quite accurately all of the personnel costs included in a major reform package but failed to predict the impact on building facility needs. Other states piloted merit pay programs only to conclude that the programs were too expensive to

implement statewide. Several states have pumped money into high technology equipment without providing funds for necessary training and technical support.

When confronted with budget problems, lawmakers should weigh not only the programmatic impact of cutbacks in reform initiatives, but the impact on morale and trust within the educational work force. "Stop and start" school reform efforts can undermine even the best-intended legislation. If the people responsible for carrying out reform measures don't trust that these measures will be continued, they cannot be expected to put forth their best effort.

Stop and Start Reform Initiatives: Changing Directions Mid-stream

Political changes and budget shortfalls have led to a stop and start approach to management, an approach that creates a roller coaster effect by the time it reaches the people responsible for students' education. As one teacher noted, "The stop/start approach to reform really works against finding out what works and what doesn't. We throw out an effective old program in favor of an untested new one."

In all six states, cases were found where school reforms had ended due to economic or political pressures. Many of the reform efforts of the 1980s and early 1990s stalled or stopped as the economy faltered, state revenues declined, and constituencies for established programs fought to preserve the status quo. In this climate, promising new reforms were the first to fall victim to spending cuts.

From the local perspective, however, nothing can get a new initiative off to a worse start than a program that requires elaborate planning and major changes in a short period of time only to be slowed down or abandoned for lack of funds. North Carolina, a leader in school reform efforts, provides a good example. Major changes in basic initiatives, based on the swings in perception of support for the state's Basic Education Program, the short lived commitment to funding the School Improvement and Accountability Act (Senate Bill 2), and the uneven pattern of salary administration, have wreaked havoc with local planning and left many educators cynical about the state's commitment to change.

Because so many initiatives end before there is a chance to determine what really works, teachers and principals feel they have engaged in a massive effort with little sense of closure or satisfaction. The result is that short-term expediency dominates over long range planning. Not surprisingly, few educators are willing to risk programs or professional reputations in an environment where there is a demonstrated lack of consistent support for school reforms. After all, the experience of most teachers and principals is that they will outlast state initiatives, local superintendents, and school board members.

Thus, 10 years after the reforms began, teachers and administrators are understandably "improvement weary" of abrupt shifts in policy initiatives. As one central office staff member put it, "A 'this too shall pass' mentality is too common."

Policy Implications

When passing major initiatives, states should consider following South Carolina's lead and establishing an oversight body at the same time. The oversight body should be charged with reporting annually on the progress of new initiatives and with holding policymakers' "feet to the fire" if support wavers.

Policymakers should fully cost new initiatives and make sure funding appropriations will cover all the costs. This is especially necessary in the area of training and planning time, which are often the first elements to be cut. It is equally important, if the initiative has the potential, to have an impact on facility needs.

Lack of Consensus: Putting the Accountability Cart Before the Horse

Another area that was deemed as important as, if not more important than, political and economic barriers to reform, was the slowness of states throughout the region, as in states across the nation, to come to terms with two fundamental questions:

- What do we want our students to know and to be able to do after graduating from our schools?
- How can we assess what our students know and are able to do in a way that is fair to all students?

Over and over again these two questions came up in discussions. The fact that none of the states has completely answered these questions was seen as haunting every well-intentioned reform effort in the region's schools. As the members of the focus groups said:

- "We are not sure what schools are expected to be."
- "There is no consistent focus or sense of priority. We don't know what's really important."
- "Expediency seems more important than beliefs. We do what is necessary, not necessarily what we believe is right."
- "Scores, not children and our effect on them, drive our accountability."

Despite the absence of clear answers to what, in retrospect, should have been the first questions, states have moved ahead at an unheard-of-pace in the implementation of accountability programs. As a result, today's accountability programs, by the states' own admissions, are not measuring what experts now believe needs to be measured.

When the southeastern states jumped on the bandwagon, accountability sounded so simple: Schools should be held accountable for results. While the concept is without a doubt needed in the schools, it has proven much more complex than anyone originally envisioned. In addition to the enormity of the job of asking people to wake up Monday morning and do their jobs differently, a number of unintended consequences have arisen.

Now that states within the SERVE region have several years of experience implementing mandated state accountability programs, it is clear that failure of low-performing systems could easily have

been predicted. By and large, failure is occurring in the same systems that historically lagged behind; with few exceptions, the typical low-performing school is rural and poor and frequently has a high proportion of minority children.

It should come as no surprise that raising the "accountability bar" has been even more challenging for school districts that had difficulty meeting less rigorous standards. However, while the new accountability measures provide hard penalties for low-performing schools, few included provisions to help historically weak school systems meet the new standards.

Furthermore, in four of the SERVE states, legislatively mandated accountability measures call for states to intervene, provide technical assistance, or in extreme cases, take control of low-performing schools. Yet in each of those states, departments of education are simultaneously charged with revamping curriculum expectations and assessment systems due to a growing belief that traditional measures, especially standardized tests, are no longer adequate measures. Local school districts are caught in the middle, driven by the standards contained in public report cards (typically standardized tests), while at the same time they are being called upon to change their curriculum goals and move to new forms of assessment.

State educational agencies charged with intervening, providing technical assistance, or taking over low-performing schools are having to change directions to develop their own capacity to respond. This process is raising fundamental questions: How do agencies make the shift from traditional enforcer to local supporter? Can agencies successfully intervene, much less take over? Do the states have the capacity to help failing schools? And a more profound question, does the state have an obligation to help them succeed? Such a shift is made even more difficult by the fact that it comes at the same time that several SERVE states are cutting back the budgets and staffing of state government, in some cases for the second or third year in a row.

There is also a lack of clear conceptual agreement about the granting of flexibility to local schools. While deregulation and flexibility have entered the school reform debate throughout the region and while states are granting more and more flexibility to local school systems, deep disagreement was found about how much flexibility should be granted. Interviews, particularly with legislative leaders and staff, indicate that there are deep and abiding questions about the degree to which states can afford to let go of control, especially in regard to budget matters.

Policy Implications

When schools measure how students are doing at the local level and scores are published in the newspaper, the results drive what happens in the classroom. Since schools understandably focus most on what is publicly measured it may not be reasonable to expect to see teaching and assessment practices change as long as accountability programs are largely based on standardized tests. Ultimately, making these systems achieve the desired results will depend on putting the accountability horse in front of the cart and answering the questions upon which accountability should be based: what do we want our students to know and be able to do and how can we best assess their performance?

Rather than focusing primarily on sanctions for low-performing school districts, policymakers should place an equal emphasis on ways to prevent failures. Can the school districts that will eventually lose in high stakes accountability contests be identified in advance? How can policy attention focus on training and facilitation to establish "winning" strategies and change the culture of these schools?

To avoid the potential negative economic impact on communities labeled "low-performing," other states should consider following South Carolina's example. South Carolina dropped the term "impaired" and substituted a "priority school" designation for schools at risk. The semantics of reform can have profound impact on economic development initiatives in rural areas.

If flexibility is a potential tool for high performance, it is needed by low-performing schools as much as, or more than, high performing schools. Flexibility must be regarded as a tool to effect improvements, not simply a reward for meeting performance standards. To determine whether local flexibility can result in higher student performance, it must be granted in key areas such as budgeting.

Under-investment in Training and Professional Development: Shortchanging the Tools for Change

From one end of the region to the other, when people were asked to isolate problems with the implementation of new reform initiatives, they pointed to the lack of both planning time and training necessary to prepare people for change. "We lack the knowledge and time to make the conceptual shift from manager to leader," one principal acknowledged. "We are still putting out fires instead of planning for the future."

As policymakers are learning, even the best reform initiative is unlikely to succeed if it is not accompanied by training focused on reconceptualizing schools and schooling; giving educators new tools and time for quality planning to support change. Our analysis showed that most school reform efforts begin and end with training, retraining and planning. But a closer examination of the spending patterns of states over this decade of reform, and the final policy document and state budgets, indicates that training and professional development have not been seen as school reform priorities.

The American Society for Training and Development, a national organization of corporate trainers and organizational development specialists, suggests that a quality enterprise should earmark three percent of payroll and fringe benefits for staff training and development. By that standard, a state such as North Carolina would earmark $42 million per year for training. Instead, the state spends $6 million, or less than one-third of 1 percent of the state funded payroll and fringe benefits for training its educators.

Although more and more reform commentators pinpoint leadership, especially at the principal level, as the key to lasting improvement, most states have not revamped their certification or initial training programs of principals since the reform movement began. Several states have established new leadership academies or training centers for existing principals, but little focus has been placed on certification requirements or initial training for the job.

The funding required for training and development is only part of the issue. For educators a major impediment to quality training and planning is time. Free time where teachers can meet for quality planning or training, especially at the elementary school level, is simply not available during the traditional school day. Due to the lack of time and resources, the tendency in the schools is to have one-day in-service workshops which tend to be hit or miss affairs. As a result, most teachers receive little training on the job. When they do participate in training, the offerings are frequently unrelated to reform initiatives and rarely include sequential follow-up.

Interviews in Georgia and Mississippi engendered a new respect for the profound effect training and professional development can have on teachers. In school districts where the state had made extra resources available, there was an openness to new ideas and excitement about learning that was missing in other comparable systems. Unfortunately, these resources were received only after the schools had been identified as low-performing; if the schools improved the resources were likely to evaporate once again.

Policy Implications

Major reform initiatives, especially those that require reconceptualizing the very structure of schools and schooling, cannot succeed without additional resources being focused on the training and re-training of educators. It is time for states to determine whether current training programs and expenditures are in alignment with the policy goals of school reform. In addition, policymakers should examine whether the employment contracts of teachers should be extended to provide quality time for training and planning before, during, and after the instructional year ends.

Given the new and changing demands on school administrators, additional fees should be placed on bringing initial administrative certification requirements and training programs into alignment. Recent North Carolina legislation that has the potential to revamp the state's training and certification may serve as a model for other states.

The current environment of school reform places additional demands on local school board members. However, training for school board members has not changed to meet these new requirements. It may be time for state boards of education to consider requiring additional training of local school board members. Mississippi's new and innovative school board training may provide a useful model for other states.

Lack of Trust: Standing in the Way of Risk Taking

The combination of all these conditions has resulted in a widespread lack of trust that pervades the system from top to bottom. Based on the interviews, the erosion of trust in reform initiatives is an enormous problem and may be the most challenging to overcome.

The trust issue was first encountered in looking at school decentralization efforts and the conclusion was drawn that mistrust was perhaps the single most important reason for the centralized control of education in most state capitals. There appears to be a perception on the part of state leaders that school boards and superintendents are not capable of successfully managing schools. So, while

policymakers talk about local empowerment, they often limit flexibility through budget controls or other regulations.

As the project progressed, however, it became clear that state policymakers are not the only ones with problems in the trusting area. School boards and superintendents, in turn, are reluctant to deregulate their relationship with principals and teachers. And so it goes, up and down the educational ladder, from policymakers to state agencies, school administrators to faculty.

By the time this chain reaches the front lines of education, it breeds a sense of cynicism summed up by a teacher: "New programs are introduced, the funding is cut off and we go back to business as usual." The unfortunate result, as another commented, is that, "A 'them-against-us' mentality prevails, making competition more important than collaboration."

With the lack of trust comes a sense of fear that took at least three distinct forms in local school districts:

- ***Fear of challenging authority:*** In most cases, there were perceptions that state officials were permitted to exercise control with little concern for the opinions of local school leaders. Local officials were hesitant to express their opposition for fear of some kind of retribution in the form of sanctions or isolation from access to information.
- ***Fear of losing status:*** Doing or saying things outside the mainstream of educational thought is frequently perceived as fraught with danger. Teachers fear transfer, principals fear reassignment, superintendents fear non-renewal, and school board members fear being voted out of office. As one principal commented, "Expediency seems to be more important than beliefs. We do what is necessary, not necessarily what we believe is right."
- ***Fear of failure:*** There are too few rewards for risk taking and too many rewards for playing it safe. Culturally, risk takers must be very strong, for if they fail, they are scorned and derided and risk their entire professional careers. Those who sit back and wait to embrace innovations that have been proven safe, on the other hand, do not face negative consequences and may even partake in the benefits extended to all.

Change is not easy. It is risky, unsettling, and just plain hard work. But if schools are to change to meet the demands of the 21st century, state and local policymakers and educators are going to have to work together to build a climate of trust which encourages innovation and thinking "out of the box."

Policy Implications

Nothing erodes trust more than mixed messages from policymakers. One of the most frequent mixed messages comes from initiatives that promise local flexibility on one hand, while reducing flexibility in critical areas such as budgeting on the other.

Too often empowerment initiatives begin by promising more than policymakers are willing to give. Instead, when enacting legislation designed to empower educators, policymakers should be clear from the start about which area will remain state decisions and which will become local decisions.

Moving from a traditional system of schooling to a site-based system of schooling is in itself an act of trust; it is also a process that will take time to evolve. Policymakers should be prepared for resistance and skepticism. People who are unaccustomed to making decisions may be tentative about assuming decision making responsibility. It will take time for them to learn to work together and even more time to convince them that policymakers would give them real authority.

Across the nation, it is common to find legislation and regulations designed to ensure that educators comply with the intent of state policy. These federal and state policies fly in the face of today's movement toward deregulation and local control. Many states, including some in the Southeast, have conducted exhaustive policy reviews with an eye toward purging public policies that are out of sync with the move to empower local schools while holding them accountable for results. Their efforts may provide a model for other states interested in effecting change and rebuilding trust.

Conclusion: Creating a Climate of Change

All of the barriers to school reform outlined in this report present significant challenges to those who care about reshaping our educational system to meet today's needs. But the conclusion found to be the most troubling was the inability of the region, and the nation, to reach consensus on what students should know and be able to do and how they should be assessed. This issue pervaded nearly every meeting of the six state advisory committee that worked on the study, and was reflected in the high degree of frustration expressed on the local level in the focus groups.

What was consistently ascertained was that accountability and testing are driving the process of reform. The public pressure for accountability and change in our schools has outstripped our school systems' ability to keep up. As a result, states are implementing accountability systems before identifying the goals, in effect putting the cart in front of the horse. In short, new and different results are being sought while continuing to use old and traditional practices.

SERVE is a strong supporter of building accountability into the region's school systems. But it is the opinion of the advisory committee that the basic questions to be answered first are: "What do we want our students to know and be able to do?" and "How do we assess these abilities?" Otherwise, much of what is being done under the name of reform is likely to be dismantled in years to come or is likely to keep state's reform initiatives running at cross purposes.

The issue of accountability is a clear and imminent educational issue. Therefore, a second study was commissioned to look into this aspect of school reform in greater depth. The results of that investigation are outlined in a separate document, *A New Framework for State Accountability Systems.* In many ways, *A New Framework for State Accountability Systems* takes up where this document leaves off. We urge you to consult this companion report to consider specific strategies for making state accountability systems work more effectively.

While information was obtained for both of these documents from the six southeastern states that make up the SERVE region, and are designed specifically to help the Southeast implement successful reform, their impact can reach far beyond. The conditions outlined here are not limited to our region, but extend into every state. It is the hope that this report support successful reform in the Southeast and across the nation. We can't afford to wait.

Notes

The Southeastern Regional Vision for Education (SERVE) is the federally funded education laboratory serving Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina. Governed by a coalition of business leaders, policymakers, and educators, SERVE works with states, districts and schools to improve educational outcomes, especially for at-risk and rural students. SERVE's mission is to promote and support the continuous improvement of educational opportunities for all learners in the southeast.

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